

WCU's Second Female President Dr. Laurie Bernotsky Wants Students to "Fall in Love" with West Chester



By Olivia Carzo and Emma Hogan

MAR 25, 2024



Image: Dr. Bernotsky's Headshot via wcupa.edu

A dream over 20 years in the making: on December 20, 2023, the Board of Governors of Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) unanimously appointed Dr. R. Lorraine "Laurie" Bernotsky as the university's 16th president — officially making her the second female president in the

university's over 150 year history. A historic and heartfelt moment that incoming president Dr. Bernotsky told *The Quad* she had envisioned the achievement 20 years earlier while on a trip to South Africa with PASSHE schools. "By the time I got home from the trip, I literally had drawn this little map of someday I'm going to be a president, and it was specifically [the] president of West Chester."

Being one of only two female faculty members on the trip, she ended up being roommates with her future mentor Dr. Madeleine Wing Adler — the university's first ever female president. When finding out she'd be rooming with Adler, she thought to herself, "Oh my gosh, like, what if I snore?"

Since it was her fifth year as a faculty member, she had just applied for tenure and promotion, a process that normally isn't decided upon until the summertime. Thankfully, Adler decided on tenures earlier than normal that year, a few weeks before they were set to leave in early May — luckily, Bernotsky's potential snoring would have no consequences. The two women spent a lot of time together on the trip. Bernotsky emphasized that it was Adler who strongly encouraged her to think about getting more involved in university leadership, as Bernotsky wanted to have a bigger impact on student success.

"Just listening to her talk about what she was able to do as president, basically taking her love of everything she was doing for the students from the classroom to this broader context of leadership; that's what really inspired me... Madeline laid the groundwork and I feel like she kind of brought me under her wing," Bernotsky reflected.

A Spotlight for Female Leadership

Bernotsky is only the second female president in the university's history — both female presidencies have occurred in the last 32 years. She is "deeply honored" by this opportunity and its recognition, attributing Adler as a great inspiration for her leadership philosophy.

The Quad asked Bernotsky how she feels her presidency can serve as a spotlight for other women in positions of authority and to young girls everywhere. Bernotsky answered saying that she hopes her leadership can help "contribute to the development of more women and girls [in] leadership roles, especially CEO-level leadership roles, because [she thinks] organizations can benefit from the way that women learn how to lead."

This is especially true "for first-generation, working-class women," according to Bernotsky, "who are socialized to follow the rules and not speak up or stand out."

“I would be glad to know that my work could inspire other women and girls to see themselves in leadership roles that may feel out of reach to them. My hope is that other women and girls can realize how much they have to offer and how talented they really are so they can see that their futures hold infinite possibilities.”

Her Path

Dr. Bernotsky started at WCU as a professor of political science 27 years ago, but growing up, she never even thought about becoming a professor, let alone the president of a university. As a first-generation college student from a working class family, she didn't have any friends growing up who went to college.

Initially, she thought the only reason that you would go to college is if you wanted to become either a doctor or a lawyer — that's it. Starting her collegiate career as a hardworking pre-med student, she reflected on the dynamic that she and her older sister had with academics. While her sister was naturally good at school, she had to study hard to get good grades.

“I was used to always working hard and getting good grades,” she states, which is why she felt like a “massive failure” when, for the first time as a straight-A student, she kept getting C's in organic chemistry, despite studying hard. Dr. Bernotsky thought she would never get into medical school at this rate and switched to pre-law — the alternative of the two tracks she believed students went to college for.

“What I didn't realize [at the time] was that's actually a pretty good grade [in that class] and I would have probably been fine. But again, I didn't have anybody to ask,” Bernotsky said of her experience. While studying for her LSATs, a poli-sci professor who had become her mentor asked her why she wanted to go into law, to which she stated “because I can't be a doctor!”

The professor explained to Bernotsky that she had the wrong idea in her head of only being able to study medicine or law and said she would be an excellent professor. Bernotsky credits this professor with her decision to attend graduate school to get her doctorate in politics at the University of Oxford. “It just never occurred to me that that's a job I could do,” she reiterates her shock.

Making WCU a More Accessible Institution

Upon her selection to lead [the largest “R2” research institution within PASSHE](#), Dr. Bernotsky stated that [public higher education is the greatest equalizer for individuals to improve their lives](#). *The Quad* asked her how she

was planning to make higher education at WCU more accessible and affordable to students in the future with her previous statement in mind.

She wants West Chester to “focus our attention on the remaining 99% [of students].” A lot of schools are “fighting it out for that top 1% of students that can pay top dollar for a college education.” Her heart is at educating the 99% of students, as “that’s where the first-gen working class students are and that’s who I want to serve.”

Bernotsky also wants the university to shift focus from evaluating whether or not students are ready for college to whether college is ready for students. She stated, “You hear that a lot, right? Are students ready for college? I think we have to change our focus and start asking ourselves, are we student ready? Are we an institution ready to serve the students that we’re bringing in? And if not, what do we need to do? So how are we ensuring that we’re preparing the students? That we’re prepared to serve the students who come to us?”

Bernotsky also notes that while “people are tired of hearing about it... the pandemic... still matters. It still has an impact on our students today and will, for sometime into the future. We have to understand what they experienced. We’ve got to understand that as a part of our student ready approach.”

She’s proud that WCU is partnering with community colleges in Delaware County, Reading and Montgomery County. “These partnerships really allow us to help students transfer seamlessly to West Chester so they can secure a higher education that’s second to none.”

Another big part of driving university accessibility, she said, is WCU’s Moon Shot for Equity partnership. According to wcupa.edu, “Moon Shot for Equity is a WCU partnership across the Southeastern PA region... to eliminate institutional equity gaps by 2030.”

“Student access is one thing. Student success is another thing. And that’s really where our focus needs to be,” Bernotsky said of the program. “I think shifting our culture, our mindset as an institution around the Moon Shot is some of the most critical work we can do.”

She also emphasized the need for WCU to stay affordable while still providing a quality education. She credited PASSHE Chancellor Dan Greenstein and the Board of Governors with their advocacy in getting funding to the state system and freezing tuition for the last several years.

While she has been an outspoken advocate alongside them about making higher education affordable in Pennsylvania, she said there’s still a battle to

be fought when it comes to affordability, as she claims PA ranks 47th out of the 50 states when it comes to public higher education funding.

Bernotsky herself attended private institutions, because as a first-generation student that is where she got scholarships to enroll. However, she knew she wanted to work in public higher education. “I wanted to be able to give my students what I was lucky enough to get at [private institutions].”

Future Plans

The Quad asked Bernotsky what issues at WCU were of immediate concern to her. Bernotsky said housing is her “number one immediate priority.” As the incoming president, she knows that it’s something she “really [has] to address... [as] we don’t have enough housing capacity right now to adequately serve the needs of our first year class or even beyond that.”

She said she’s in conversation with those involved in the planning process right now and has tasked her senior leadership team with making housing a priority once she becomes president. “I really think we have to deliver on it as soon as we possibly can,” Bernotsky said regarding building more housing. However, she also told us that any housing built needs to be high quality and provide a safe environment for all students.

Another issue she plans to address is the effects of the pandemic on student preparedness. “We have to understand [students] are coming to us, maybe unevenly prepared so to speak — through no fault of their own — but because this learning environment just had to change so dramatically,” she said of the effects of remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. “We’ve got to think about how do we keep focusing on student success?”

On the topic of student success, she said WCU needs to make sure its students will be competitive in the job market. “We live in a society changing so fast,” she said, “Jobs that are a big deal today didn’t exist ten years ago. And that pace of change is going to keep growing.”

Another challenge surrounding the future job market Bernotsky thinks about is “preparing our students for jobs that don’t exist yet and really making sure that we can be as financially stable as we can to keep what we are doing [as] accessible and affordable.”

WCU was recently honored by the U.S. Department of Education as a Green Ribbon School. An award that the Department of Education notes [“honors schools, districts, and postsecondary institutions for reducing environmental impact and costs, improving health and wellness and offering effective sustainability education.”](#) Dr. Bernotsky previously stated her dedication to the

university's sustainability efforts. When asked about her plans to continue WCU's commitment to our environment she said that the progress we have made was really thanks to our campus community that embraced a sort of "grassroots effort."

She goes on to explain how a lot of good work regarding sustainability has been done and continues to be underway, but that it is a "balancing act." As a university community, there is already "so much enthusiasm [around this work]." However, being able to meaningfully engage in a revision process of our "current climate action plan" has to be done "at the same time as other mission critical goals... like financial sustainability."

In December of 2021, WCU was elevated from an M1 to an R2 research institution as designated by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. An R2 institution is defined by the Carnegie Classifications of Institutions of Higher Education as an institution that has "at least 20 doctoral research degrees that also have at least \$5 million in total research expenditures (as reported through the NSF HERD Survey)."

This elevation in research designation is a very important milestone in WCU's history. As such, *The Quad* asked Bernotsky what her plans are to guide us towards an R1 status.

"I think you've hit on something important. When we think about identifying the goals, that kind of the what's next, [is identifying the goals of the institution]. One of the things I want to make sure I do in the first year of my presidency is... convening a transition team made up of faculty, staff, and students to help identify what those goals and priorities should be."

She noted that WCU's acquisition of such an achievement is "interesting, [as] it wasn't a specific goal [they set out to achieve]." That as an institution, "we found ourselves qualifying to be R2 because we were doing the things we believed in doing as an institution, so it was a really nice bonus. It's a wonderful status to have, but we are, of course, a teaching-centered institution and that's not going to change."

Bernotsky said that one of the main challenges with schools that are R1 — a higher designation than R2 — or are trying to become R1 is that in pursuit of that status, "they've sacrificed the student success mission... [and] we don't want to be like them." Student success is of key importance to West Chester University and she believes that at this moment in time, "building on our R2 status and making sure we do everything we can for our faculty and students around is a good place for us to start."

“Finding ways to connect our faculty research with student research and increasing those opportunities” through the teacher-scholar model is of key importance to the university, and Dr. Bernotsky believes that our newly-minted R2 status can really help us leverage that and be a great opportunity for students and professors alike.

In this year alone, “we’ve been able to generate, in grant funding, nearly 7 million... we’ve doubled the number of student research positions” as a result of this R2 status.

When The Quad asked her what she was most excited about, she laughed, noting that “the list is long, but... I’m really excited about being part of what’s next. We still have chapters to write as an institution. I have served here for more than 25 years and during that time I’ve been really privileged to be part of the evolution of what West Chester has become — this incredible institution. But, we’ve never rested on our laurels and we can’t rest on our laurels [now].”

Bernotsky is also “excited to have an opportunity to lead at a place that’s really dedicated to continuous improvement — thinking about new ways to serve our students. I want to listen to students, faculty and staff.”

But, maybe most importantly, when asked about becoming the president at a school that values first-generation college students, such as herself, she said, “I am just delighted that I get to serve in this way. It means the world to me that I can serve at an institution that has such an emphasis on serving first-gen students...because that’s where I come from.”

She’s currently serving as the Interim President of PennWest University where she enjoys being able to work more with student leaders. Students there told her the semester was going too fast. Bernotsky thought they weren’t looking forward to finals, but when discussing the matter further, she discovered they really just didn’t want to graduate and leave. “I sat there and just thought, ‘How fantastic is this?!’”

She wants WCU students to feel the same. “I want students to fall in love with this place. I want them to feel when they step onto this campus, they belong here, they’re happy that they came here, this is where they want to be. I want them to feel like they never want to leave and I’m not kidding about that,” she told us lightheartedly.

“That’s what excites me about being in the role of a president. You get to have an impact on that. We have so much opportunity to get our students to fall in love with their experience here, to give them a good experience here, what a

lifelong impact that could be,” she said of her goals here, “I’m excited about being part of creating that magic.”

Olivia Carzo is a fourth-year English major in the Honors College with a concentration in Visual and Digital Rhetoric and minors in Journalism and Linguistics.

Emma Hogan is a fourth-year English major with a minor in Journalism.